

Britain's Neverendum on Europe

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Mark Dawson Do 16 Jun 2016

The campaign for the Brexit referendum has been unusually long and arduous. This might explain one of the strangest features of this referendum – while European observers might consider this one of the most important decisions the UK will ever take, British voters have largely reacted to this campaign with a yawn. The greatest fear of the pro-remain campaign is not that there is a majority for leave but that only the elderly will show up at the polls, with the ‘silent majority’ of younger, more pro-EU Britons, staying home to watch Euro 2016 instead.

The current marathon is only, however, beginning. While the UK Prime Minister has told us that the June 23rd vote will settle ‘once and for all’ Britain’s vexed relationship with Europe, I wouldn’t count on it. The upcoming referendum has all the hallmarks of a ‘neverendum’: a campaign that tries to resolve an issue yet only succeeds in polarizing opinion yet further, guaranteeing its presence on the political agenda for years, if not decades, to come.

The main reason concerns a clash between economic and political realities. First, the economic reality. As even leave campaigners admit, there is no such thing as Britain out of Europe. A UK that conducts the majority of its trade with the EU will inevitably require a comprehensive trade deal with its European partners. If precedents from other countries hold, any such deal will come with significant restrictions on national sovereignty. Other comparators, such as Norway, have untrammelled access to the single market but an obligation to accept EU law wholesale in return. If this is true, any ‘out’ vote is only a vote for years of arduous negotiation, resulting (at best) in a Britain that remains heavily entangled within European policy-making. Ironically, while EU rules on the lengths of cucumbers and bananas have long provided Euro-sceptic scare-stories, precisely such rules are here to stay regardless of the outcome.

Second, the political reality. A large section of the British political class view Britain’s relationship with Europe through the lenses not of cost-benefit analysis but identity. For them, no amount of trade statistics or re-negotiation deals will satisfy them that the EU is anything less than an attack on ancient British liberties. As others have remarked, in this the UK has followed the US in embracing the post-truth era: no explanation of Justice and Home Affairs law seems able to convince leavers that visa liberalization for Turkey will not lead to Turkish masses on British shores. This group will see any post-Brexit negotiation – however good – as a betrayal of the will of the British people.

This feeling will also hold in the event of a remain vote. However big the majority, those who have built their political lives around bashing the EU are not going to be persuaded that EU membership is in the UK’s interests. Instead, they are going to argue that the British people have been duped – that January’s ‘re-negotiation’ was no such thing; or that the referendum campaign has retained Britain’s membership only through scaring people into voting for Europe. For this group, the campaign will not be the end but the beginning of a guerilla campaign for Brexit.

This is the dilemma that the UK faces – the economic reality is a Britain in Europe; the political reality is a Britain out of it. The outcome of this historical paradox is a Britain that will *never* settle its relationship with Europe, and that certainly won’t do so on June 23rd. The consequence is likely to be extensive disappointment and rancor regardless of the outcome.

The signs for this scenario are already there. This has been one of the most divisive campaigns in British electoral history. It reached its peak only last week. Asked whether he would support ‘stabbing the Prime Minister in the back’ after June 23rd, a Senior Conservative MP replied: ‘I don’t want to stab him in the back, I want to stab him in the front so I can see the expression on his face.’ Most of the political violence has thus been intra-party (or ‘blue on blue’) with senior Conservatives using the referendum as a proxy leadership campaign. The savviest of the would-be leaders – Boris Johnson and Michael Gove – switched their allegiances to ‘leave’ early on,

knowing full well that such a stance would enamor them to Conservative euro-sceptic voters regardless of the outcome. In the event of a leave vote, they could quickly step into the shoes of a deposed pro-remain Prime Minister. In the event of remain, they are perfectly positioned to channel the disappointed energies of those disgruntled identity voters. Disappointment over 'betrayal' can easily be turned into a political movement to campaign in the next UK general election for unilateral British withdrawal from the Union.

The danger is that Britain's European partners play into their hands. The nature of the January 're-negotiation' is that many of its terms still have to be implemented after a remain vote. The European Parliament has already indicated reservations about some of these measures, questioning their compatibility with principles of free movement. Nothing could fit Euro-sceptic fantasies better than an EU leadership that unravels the terms of UK re-negotiation after a successful remain vote. How better to make the case that UK voters were conned into remaining in the Union than to point to promises of future EU legislation that were never fulfilled? The irony is that David Cameron may repeat the same mistakes as his early referendum on Scotland – in that case, another promise to transfer powers on the eve of a crucial vote, designed to assuage doubters, only to come back to haunt him later.

In the last week, the polls have tightened significantly – the decision by the leave campaign to centre their arguments on immigration seems to have succeeded in giving their beleaguered campaign a boost. A Prime Minister who has spent his career pouring scorn on Europe – in a country whose entire political class has neglected the positive case for the EU for a generation – can hardly be shocked when the British people look askance when he sings the EU praises. The omens for leave look good. Even if leave's campaign fails in the short-term, however, the conditions in the long-term look good. In the event of a leave vote, Britain will be stuck with Europe: about that there is no question. In the event of a remain vote, however, the EU is certain to be stuck with a disgruntled Britain; one that remains torn over how it can live together with its European partners. The long June 23rd campaign is going to get even longer. It is only just beginning.

A German version of this article has been published by [DIE ZEIT](#).

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SUGGESTED CITATION Dawson, Mark: *Britain's Neverendum on Europe*, *VerfBlog*, 2016/6/16, <http://verfassungsblog.de/britains-neverendum-on-europe/>.